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AUTHOR Yager, Geoffrey G.; Beck, Terry F.
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ABSTRACT

Beginning counselors are rarely able to avoid anxiety during early counseling sessions. The fears involved in demonstrating counseling arise from: (1) irrational beliefs concerning "the perfect response;" (2) academic coursework which seems to equate psychological illness with poor counseling skills; (3) uncertainty about necessary skills; and (4) anxiety engendered by the change process. Research on the effects of practicum anxiety indicates that highly anxious students are less effective in counseling with clients and that anxious counselors often have reduced levels of recall. Defensive expressions of resistance used by beginning counselors to counteract their fears of criticism and evaluation have been investigated; each response to anxiety represents an attempt to avoid responsibility for counseling session process and outcome. A catalog of typical, anxiety-initiated, inappropriate responses of trainees with clients would help practicum supervisors to identify, understand, and empathize with students. Supervisors of beginning counseling students should recall their initial experiences as counselors, should not make assumptions without confirmation, and should trust and respect supervisors as developing professionals. (Author/NRB)

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Beginning Practicum Experiences: Anxiety and Its Consequences

Geoffrey G. Yager
University of Cincinnati

and

Terry F. Beck
Kutztown State University, Pennsylvania

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Beginning Practicum Experiences: Anxiety and Its Consequences

Try a brief experiment with us. Close your eyes (after reading this paragraph, of course) and construct a mental image of yourself during your first client-counselor interaction. Incorporate into your imagery the exact setting in which this interview took place. If possible, bring back the smells, sounds, textures or tastes of that moment: make your image as vivid and realistic as possible. What are you saying? How are you feeling? What is happening with your client?

Go ahead, now, and try it!

. . .

Well? If you are anything like us, your heart is now beating considerably more rapidly than it was at the start of this article. Additionally, you are probably realizing how thankful you are that you will not actually need to live through your initial exposures to counseling again. One's beginning steps as a helper are scarey! Certainly, we continue to feel some anxiety whenever we meet a new client, but our present day anxiety is nothing more than a very fragile relic of the past terrors of the beginning practicum.

We have asked you to employ a vivid recollection of your own experience in order to establish a necessary perspective on this article. As we describe beginning trainees within this paper, we attempt to convey our observations in a humorous manner. Given our own acknowledged anxiety at a similar point in our own training, our humor is as much directed at ourselves as at our student counselors.

Theoretical Analysis: Why the Terror?

Why is one's first exposure to the experience of being a counselor so fearful? We have several ideas which may provide partial answers to this key question:

1. Student counselors don't see demonstrations of good counselors who, on occasion, are making mediocre or poor responses. Too often, counselor educators present only ideal examples to illustrate counseling--each response of the model counselor seems to be "right on target" as the demonstration interview moves along without a hitch. Space restrictions may make such "mastery" models unavoidable in text books, but video and audiotape demonstrations could be designed to illustrate effective counseling without perfections. Most students need only the gentlest, most subtle (and unintended) hint that perfect counseling is attainable, and they will subsequently strive for the "correct" response with every statement. (They will also tend to internalize a reverse side of this perfection belief: that there are a limitless number of bad counseling statements that will immediately and irrevocably turn the client off.) Such perfectionistic ideas lead inevitably to practicum anxiety (cf., Mooney & Carlson, 1976).

We encourage all our perfectionistic students to heed Lakein's (1973) advice:

> Some people use up valuable time by endlessly weighing pros and cons for fear of taking a wrong step. Making "mistakes" can be a great time-saver. You find out what works by trying. (p. 155)

2. Academic coursework typically exposes students to the theorists (e.g., Carkhuff, 1969; Combs, Avila & Purkey, 1971; Egan, 1975; Mueller & Kell, 1972; Rogers, 1971) who assert that there is a strong relationship between psychological well-being and one's ability to aid clients within a counseling relationship. Thus--"Not only will I be embarrassed if I don't do well, but I'll also be showing

that I'm psychologically troubled!" Of course, the greater the student's initial concern about their own psychological health, the greater the anxiety generated.

3. Despite increasing specificity in the definitions of counseling behaviors over recent years, students are always going to be fearful of being evaluated (by the client or the supervisor) on certain criteria of which they are unaware.

4. The practicum contact with clients is an integral part of the process of learning the skills of counseling. Learning, of course, involves change, and change, no matter how important, needed, or desired, will often evoke fear. The fear of change is basically a fear of the unknown. Combined with this basic fear is another common misperception among counseling students: "If I find these new counseling skills are more helpful than what I've done in the past, all of that will have been totally worthless!" This "all or none" idea is closely related to the conception of perfection discussed earlier.

Effects of Practicum Anxiety

Milliken and Kirchner (1971) have found that anxious counselors are less accurate in their ability to recall words spoken and feelings expressed in simulated interviews. This empirical finding, of course, fits with our own experience: highly anxious students are less effective in counseling with clients. In essence, if counselors are preoccupied with handling their feelings of anxiety, they will be thinking, at least some of the time, about their fears. Such attention limits the total time devoted to listening to and understanding the client.

Bauman (1972) has explored several expressions of resistance that beginning counselors use to defend themselves against their fears of criticism and evaluation. Each of these categories of resistance is typically employed in

supervision when reviewing earlier counseling interactions. Bauman's list includes submission ("Whatever the supervisor says is right, and I'll do it!"); turning the tables ("What do you, the supervisor, think I should do?"); mea culpa ("I'm no good, and everything I do is wrong!"); helplessness ("Since I have no expertise, the supervisor should take all the responsibility for whatever happens with my client."); and projection ("My supervision is useless: it inhibits my spontaneity and effectiveness. If I'm not maximally effective, it's the supervisor's fault!") Each of these methods of dealing with anxiety in practicum represents an attempt to avoid responsibility for whatever occurs in the counseling sessions. "Obviously, if I'm not the one responsible, I need not feel anxious about the consequences of my counseling!" Unfortunately, the anxiety continues unabated because counselor trainees, even if they may be able "to fool" their supervisors for a time, cannot convince themselves of their lack of responsibility.

Reacting to Anxiety When with a Client

Although we found Bauman's (1972) analysis of common responses to supervisors as very helpful, we have also identified the need for a similar catalog of trainees' reactions with clients themselves. Such a list would prove valuable for supervisors to enable them to identify, understand, and empathize with their students during early counseling attempts. For counseling students, the list would not be likely to eliminate the occurrence of these typical responses. However, in reviewing their own audiotapes, students would have a much better chance to be able to identify these less appropriate reactions to clients. Since identification is the initial step to behavior change, this categorization may accelerate counselor learning by serving as an advanced organizer.

What follows is a list, undoubtedly incomplete, of common inappropriate responses of prepracticum and practicum students to the stress of client contact. The list is based upon our own experience as supervisors of prepracticum role-plays and initial field practicums. (Also, we must admit that more than one of these examples was brought to mind by following our imagery suggestions at the start of the article!) Each category is introduced with a typical example and followed by a short analysis. Since there is a general similarity in the most helpful supervisory reactions to these counselor statements, comments on supervision are saved until the end of the paper.

Shook, Rattled, and Out-of-Role

An early role-play: "Ah . . . (looking directly at the supervisor/observor) I just don't know what to say to that! . . . I'm stuck!"

When challenged, our "flight or fight" mechanism is triggered. During a role-play, the consequences are normally sufficiently lenient that a flight response is perceived as acceptable. This type of response, however, is very uncharacteristic beyond the first two weeks of practicum--either we are actually teaching students the needed coping skills, or the embarrassment involved in admitting inadequacy has made the response too aversive.

So Long, It's been Good to Know You

We stress the importance of establishing common assumptions with the client about the purpose and direction of counseling before too much time has elapsed in counseling. One counselor interpretation of this suggested structuring takes this form: "If for any reason whatsoever, you don't think that counseling is working, you don't have to come back. Counseling, you see, is entirely voluntary,

and you don't have to be here."

The explanation of the voluntary nature of counseling given above appears to be close to an encouragement for the client to quit. The type of statement reflects a doubt as to the counselor's competence. If conflicts arise, the client is given an "easy out" in advance. Yes, the client should know that counseling is voluntary, but the client should not be led to believe that it's time to quit at the first sign of anxiety!

To the Rescue

Within the first five minutes of an initial counseling session: "Since your mother-in-law gets you so upset, why don't you just talk with her about it?"

The counselor is willing to accept the client's presenting problem at face value. It shows a minimal understanding of the importance of the development of a counseling relationship. Since clients are usually ambivalent about change and reluctant to alter behavior patterns, this kind of response is often met with a variety of client resistances. The immediate solution presented by the counselor may also be seen as a reluctance to become more deeply involved in the relationship.

The Pole Vault

During an early counseling session:

CL. "My pet goldfish died last night."

CO. "You're overwhelmed with grief--and perhaps guilt--that you've allowed your fish to die."

This response is characterized by persistent efforts to "vault" the Carkhuff ladder and to respond at a 4.0 level with each and every response. Ratings below 3.0 are seen as obvious indicators of failure despite assurances otherwise.

This response reveals a concern for adequacy, approval, and perfection. The tendency to respond in this way will, at best, produce a choppy and rather disjointed interview. At worst, it would block entirely the possibility of a developing relationship: interpretations may be inappropriate or presented too early for the client to accept or understand them. Counselors need to internalize knowledge that a normally facilitative sequence of counseling inevitably includes a range of responses, including (dare we admit it?) some 1.0 statements.

It's Not All That Bad

An empathy role-play demonstration:

CL. "I'm so down this week I just don't know what to do. All I can think about is the hopelessness of my life right now . . . I'm no good to anyone . . . "

CO. "You feel a little bit sad--kind of upset about something."

This response is seen in the efforts of counselors to minimize the emotional intensity of the client's experience. A number of modifier words may be used in diluting the strength of a strongly charged feeling: "sort of", "a little", "kind of", "somewhat", or "maybe".

Typically, the "mollification modifiers" are a protection of oneself against the discomfort generated by intense emotional expression. Unsure of whether they can handle such emotions, beginning counselors attempt to reduce directly the feelings that their clients express. Unfortunately, the clients involved are less easily convinced of the reduced intensity of emotions than are their student counselors.

Please Tell Me I'm Right

Throughout an early counseling session: "You are feeling really hurt because

your boyfriend left you; is that it?" or "You're jealous of the freedom that she has always had and you've missed; isn't that it?"

This response involves repeatedly reflecting counselee's statements in the interrogative. Counselors who consistently employ this approach are likely to be unsure of their competence and reluctant to risk being wrong (that description just about fits all beginning students, doesn't it?) Counselors break out of this habit as they realize that increased understanding of the client is the goal <u>not</u> the reassurance that previous understandings are correct.

Double and Triple Dribbles

"You feel sad because you flunked the exam . . . even though you passed all your other tests . . . and besides, you'll probably get a chance to make it up . . . it's a pretty lousy situation to be in, and it's not your major anyway . . . it's a real bummer (this last phrase is usually inaudible)."

This response is seen when counselors extend (dribble) their initial, inaccurate, and concrete response to include qualification and alternatives that lessen the impact of the initial response. Everything of importance cannot be included in one response, and counselors quickly learn to make their comments short and focused on whatever appears to be most important.

Silence Isn't Golden

A first interview:

CL. "Well, I was on my way to visit a friend in Canada. I think it was, ah . . . (pause for 10 seconds)."

CO. "Could it be Toronto or Montreal?"

CL. "No, I was trying to remember how it was that I met Fran. Let's see . . . (pause for 10 seconds)."

CO. "Maybe it was at a campground on the way or in a disco?"

Many trainees are particularly terrified of silence. A counseling session with more than five seconds of "dead air" is felt to be a disaster. This emotional reaction will motivate many counselors to fill in the gaps with whatever (sense or nonsense) that comes into their heads.

We Could Have Been Twins

A second session with the same client: "I swear; something exactly like that happened to me several years ago. I know just how you feel!"

As counselors, we cannot know exactly how the client feels. Beginning counselors may employ a response such as this in a genuine attempt to convey understanding, or they may use it to appeal for acceptance and approval from the client. If the client accepts the statement at face value (a very unlikely event), the counselor has unfortunately cut off any further information about the situation. If the counselor "really understands", why should the client say anymore?

I Hear You Talking, but You Can't Come in

The counselor sits five feet away from the client and, with arms crossed, leans comfortably back in a soft chair: "The betrayal of your best friend left you deeply hurt."

Counselors can make "appropriate" empathic responses in the absence of nonverbal indicators of involvement. These responses, however, are rendered ineffective by the lack of attention to nonverbals. Counselors who continually respond in this manner are retreating from the likely increased anxiety involved in any attempt to become a part of the client's world.

Oops, Sorry about That

Well into a series of counseling sessions:

CL. "Dammit, I have the feeling that all of this counseling business is just a waste of my time. I don't feel any different now than when I first started coming to see you . . . It makes me angry to think I've wasted so much time--not to mention the money!"

CO. "I'm just trying to help . . . Ah, I've seen some things change in you . . . Ah, you seem to be ah . . . more involved in some things. I mean, gee . . . I think we've done a lot here."

The most anxiety provoking instance in counseling involves the client's direct attack on you and your competence. When this sort of attack is combined with anger, the resulting situation is difficult for any counselor, whether a veteran or a novice. Our natural tendency in such a situation is to react defensively: to deny culpability and explain our efforts. Even though experienced counselors have "ridden through" many such confrontations in an extended series of client contacts, it takes every bit of concentrated effort to "turn around" defensiveness and ask oneself: "How is my client feeling?" Empathy and an open, non-defensive exploration will often push the counseling to a deeper and more productive level of operation. Beginning counselors should be exposed to this type of situation, but we cannot expect them to do any better than we ourselves did when we initially encountered a similar client "attack".

Suggestions for the Supervisor

We do not propose any earth-shaking suggestions as to how to deal with occurrences of the behaviors characterized in the above list. Essentially, we have but three, rather logical, recommendations for supervising any beginning

student.

1. Don't forget your own initial experiences as a counselor. It is truly embarrassing how often we have forgotten our own advice in this respect. How many times have we said, "There's nothing to worry about, just relax and do your best," without even an internal acknowledgment of the impossibility of the suggestion? A supervisory response of this type may, in fact, serve to heighten the anxiety: "Now, I'm not only anxious, but I'm anxious about my anxiety!"

2. Don't make assumptions without confirmation. For example, a counseling student's lack of empathy in an interview may have a variety of causes--situational anxiety, insufficient practice, or fear of a deeper relationship. Students must be encouraged to present their perceptions of what is happening in the interview and how it developed. As with most aspects of supervision, liberal doses of encouragement (positive reward) should be given as the counselor openly and honestly discusses feelings, thoughts, and actions. These open explorations should be equally rewarded whether they reflect negatively or positively on the student's performance in the counseling.

3. Trust and respect your supervisees as the developing professionals that they are: Your trust promotes trust in your trainees, and the key to any effective supervision is mutual trust. Continued role-playing and/or direct practice of the beginning interpersonal skills in a trusting atmosphere will eventually come close to eliminating each of the inappropriate responses described in this paper. With each trial attempt, the counselor becomes less and less afraid. Reduced fear provides more opportunity to learning and growth.

Although we have dealt with only development of basic skills in early practicums, the process of supervision will undoubtedly be enhanced by the same three general suggestions just outlined. The development of the more advanced

skills of client assessment, strategy implementation, and evaluation, although not as intimately tied to the reduction of anxiety, can be facilitated by the same understanding, compassionate, and trusting supervisory approach.

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